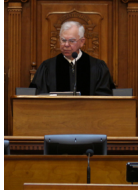


Speaking to a joint session of the Georgia General Assembly, Chief Justice Hugh P. Thompson delivered his second State of the Judiciary address on February 4, 2015. “Each day in Georgia, our judges dispense justice,” the Chief Justice observed. “Each day, when they look at the people in their courtroom, they consider that their decisions will change individuals’ lives forever.”



The state of Georgia’s judiciary is sound and strong because each day across the state, prosecutors, public defenders, sheriff and their deputies, clerks, probation officers, and more than 1400 judges go to work, committed to bringing justice to the state.

Access to Justice

“Too many hard-working Georgians believe that justice is out of their reach, either because it’s too expensive or because of where they live. According to the National Center for Access to Justice, when it comes to access to attorneys, Georgia ranks in the bottom ten states.”

In Judge David J. Roper’s Augusta courtroom, 35 percent of litigants in domestic cases now represent themselves. There are six rural counties in Georgia where there are no lawyers and another 20 where there are fewer than five.

This year, legislation is being introduced to encourage private civil attorneys to work in severely underserved rural areas. In exchange for five years of work in counties that desperately need legal assistance, those attorneys would receive assistance paying off law school debts.

Specialty Courts

Georgia is a model for criminal justice reform. More than 5100 Georgians participated in specialty courts during 2014. These courts are another example of savings for Georgia, as a state and as a people. Ordinary Georgians who have spent their lives abusing drugs are graduating from Drug Courts in order to work, pay taxes, and contribute to their communities.



Veterans courts focus on helping those who have helped this nation. In Judge Reuben Green’s court, Cobb veterans court participants are paired with fellow veterans who volunteer their time to stand and help participants along their way. “We owe these young men and women whom we sent off to war a second chance and the treatment they need for the issues caused by their service to our country,” the Chief Justice quoted Judge Green.

Growth in Georgia

For the first time, Georgia’s population has surpassed 10 million. “Like other states, Georgia is

experiencing a growth in our elderly population.” This will bring one of the greatest challenges our courts will face, particularly to the probate courts. The probate courts lack the staff and resources they need to deal with more and more seniors who have no family to support them. The probate courts of the state will need the support of the General Assembly as the population ages and more resources are called to bear on those courts.

As the population in the state grows, so do the companies that do business in Georgia. “Our courts must be ready and able to quickly resolve business disputes,” Chief Justice Thompson said. Fulton County’s Business Court, under the leadership of Judge John Goger, provides prompt resolution of complex commercial litigation by a panel of experienced judges. “As we go forward, we would like to see more of these courts in our state.”

The Chief Justice lauded Georgia’s Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) system, reporting that each year 70 percent of the cases that go through ADR are settled, resulting in nearly 25,000 fewer civil cases in the courts.

Diversity

As the state’s population grows, so does the diversity of the population. “Our judges must reflect our population,” the Chief Justice said. “The perception of justice is almost as important as justice itself.”

Two important milestones were reached for the superior courts in January. On January 1, Judge Meng Lim took his seat on the bench of the Tallapoosa Judicial Circuit as the first Asian-American Superior Court Judge in Georgia, after winning a run-off election in the two-county circuit last year. And on January 7, Judge Dean Bucci of the Paulding Judicial Circuit was sworn-in as the first Hispanic Superior Court Judge in the state.

The Chief Justice closed his address by saying, “Judge Lim and the other judges I have mentioned here today represent our state’s future. They represent the many judges who embody the values Georgians hold dear – humility, integrity, hard work, courage, resiliency, love and county, and love of community.”